News and Comment

Office of Education: Weak on Inside, Abused on Outside, It Is a Long Way from Achieving an Important Role

The Administration is looking for a new commissioner to take over what is probably the most unloved, abused, and timid of all federal agencies—the Office of Education.

The need for a new commissioner arises from the forthcoming resignation of Sterling M. McMurrin, who is returning to the University of Utah, where he taught philosophy for 12 years. During his 16 months as commissioner, McMurrin performed with distinction and imagination that, it is generally agreed, set him far above his predecessors, but the ailments afflicting the agency are of such magnitude that McMurrin's efforts simply brought about a slight improvement in its pulse. The Office of Education is far from being up and about and is a long way from becoming "the principal agency of the federal government responsible for formulating educational policy and coordinating educational activities at the national level"; the words come from the U.S. Government Organization Manual, but they have no relation to reality, a conclusion which is not disputed inside or outside the office.

The letter of resignation that McMurrin sent to President Kennedy has not yet been released, but it is understood that the reasons he set forth in it are very much in line with his previous public statements about his attitude toward the job: he does not care for living in Washington and he wishes to be a teacher. But privately McMurrin has also expressed dismay over the complex state of affairs which makes operating the Office of Education very much like swimming through a pool of molasses.

In its outside relations, the Office of Education finds itself confronted by a difficult and often hostile environment composed of congressmen who are suspicious of its intentions, and professional education groups that want to bend it to their own purposes; internally, it is afflicted by a rigid civil service personnel structure that defies efforts to bring in new personnel. For example, when McMurrin arrived, he was free to fill only two high-level positions in the 1140-man office. Although he reorganized the office, the outcome simply involved placing the same people in new positions; it is said within the office that he never managed to wrest control from the veteran personnel who have seen commissioners come and go while they themselves endure. However, even if the personnel restrictions were eliminated, any recruiting effort would still run into the unwillingness of outstanding people to work in an agency where their efforts stand an overwhelming chance of coming to nothing.

National Attitude

Underlying all these difficulties and the failure to cope with them is the fact that in Congress, and quite probably throughout the nation, the balance is against a thoroughgoing federal involvement in education. The reasons for this are numerous. They include, first of all, a slowly diminishing, but still massive, indifference to the quality of the nation's schools. Congress and the American people have concluded that it is best to err on the side of generosity in financing defense and space endeavors, but this same spirit of largesse does not apply to education. In addition, the question of the federal role in education is entangled in conservative opposition to new and large-scale spending programs, fears that general federal aid would erode local control, the inability to work out a politically acceptable formula on the issue of aid to private schools, and the fears of southerners that federal aid would be a lever to force school desegregation.

In Congress, the composite effect of these factors has been to limit federal aid to specific areas, usually those on which a national defense label can be hung without too much explanation. Under these restrictions, a great deal of money in recent years has been routed through the Office of Education, including $231 million last year for aid to public schools in areas whose populations are increased by federal activities, and $228 million for loans and grants under the appetizingly titled National Defense Education Act.

However, as the sums handled by the Office of Education have increased, congressional concern about the office's functions has also risen, with the result that by statute and by grim, informal warnings, Congress has largely confined the office to the role of paymaster for carefully delineated programs. Until McMurrin arrived, the office did not seem to be chaffing at this confinement, but in the few instances when he tried to break the bounds, Congress made it clear to him that every move was under scrutiny.

The effect of internal sluggishness and outside hostility has been to keep the Office of Education removed from the mainstream of influence on American education. One of its principal tasks when it was set up in 1867 was to collect statistics, and, as far as many people are concerned, it should not be allowed to exercise its own discretion in anything beyond this number-gathering function.

The selection of McMurrin aroused considerable enthusiasm in some educational and governmental circles because it represented a break with the past and held out the hope that the Kennedy Administration intended to revitalize the office. Unlike most of his 14 predecessors in the job, McMurrin did not have a background in elementary or secondary education, nor was his selection to the taste of the 800,000-member National Education Association, which was accustomed to having long and warm relations with the men who fill the Office of Education's top positions. (The NEA also has similar relations with the men who leave the office's top positions; McMurrin's predecessor, for example, went to a post with the NEA.)

The hopes aroused by his appointment plainly have not been fulfilled, but considering the dimensions of the office's problems, McMurrin did not do too badly. He failed—actually little ef-

fort was expended—to develop alliances in Congress or to try to alter the fairly widespread impression in Congress that the office is too mediocre to warrant serious attention. (One congressman who plays an important role in legislation on education remarked last week that "I don't even know where the Office of Education is located. You'd think that McMurrin would have asked me over for a cup of coffee during the time he's been here." Another congressman remarked that "I'm not interested in the Office of Education. As far as I'm concerned, it has no more to do with education than the Bureau of Mines.")

On the other hand, McMurrin has done a capable job of developing good relations with the heads of other agencies that play important roles in federal aid to education. In the past, these relations have been almost nonexistent, a fact which was periodically illustrated when the Office of Education asked other federal agencies how much they were spending on education programs. The information was needed for a biannual report on federal education expenditures, but many agencies, not taking the office too seriously, neglected to reply. One of these was the National Institutes of Health, which, together with the Office of Education, is part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. NIH, the nation's principal source of funds for training medical researchers, replied that it spends nothing on education; its expenditures, it said, are solely for research. McMurrin, in the course of his relatively short reign, made some progress in winning the cooperation of other agencies, but his subordinates, who have to deal with the problem on a day-to-day basis, say a great deal remains to be done. One of the misfortunes of his departure from the office is that the esteem felt for him by other agency heads is of a personal nature; his length of service was too short for much of it to rub off on the office.

Argued for Quality

McMurrin's least measurable, but possibly most important, achievement was to state the case for quality in education—particularly the need for improving the professional preparation of teachers—not simply for improving the salaries and status of teachers, a goal which entranced his predecessors and many professional education associations as a one-shot cure for the ills of American education. In calling for quality and in denouncing mediocrity, McMurrin led many well-established education groups to conclude that a dangerous man had come to head the agency that they formerly called their own. This opinion was fostered by speeches in which McMurrin repeatedly expressed views that had never before emanated from the Office of Education, such as:

> . . . It is appropriate to ask whether the best education students are getting an honest-to-goodness intellectual workout that taxes their capacities as they might be taxed in mathematics or electrical engineering, for instance, or in classical philology or symbolic logic. . . .
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> Whether he teaches the first grade or in graduate school, the teacher should be, above all else, an educated man. That he must know the subject that he teaches we may assert dogmatically, and on this point we should be willing to get downright rough, because here the present condition of education is something of a national disgrace. . . .
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> It is a strange thing that it has been common to assume that university students of scarcely more than average ability should be admitted to the teaching profession. . . .
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> No one should teach the philosophy of education who is not qualified to teach philosophy. Surely we should insist that no one be permitted to teach the psychology of education who is not qualified to teach psychology.

Speeches containing these lines attracted considerable attention in the press and in professional journals and, while the Office of Education lost a lot of its old allies, it picked up a good number of new ones, especially in the academic world—outside the schools of education. The speeches also created the impression that at long last the Office of Education was asserting itself on the national scene. The fact, however, was that McMurrin's performance in lambasting the quality of education had almost no bearing on Congress's attitude toward the agency, nor did it have any concrete effect on the agency's operations; it certainly did not lead the Office of Education to conclude that it could emulate some of its more free-wheeling sister agencies and branch out into areas for which it had no specific congressional authorization. The office has been criticized for this and has been accused of being an accomplice to its own difficulties, but an examination of the dialogue that takes place when it appears before Congress for money shows clearly that it cannot get away with a liberal interpretation of its congressional mandate.

When it sought to apply such an interpretation in selecting fields of study that would qualify for fellowships under the National Defense Education Act, the Senate appropriations subcommittee that passes on its funds issued a stern reminder that the link between the subject and national defense had better be an obvious one. Under this pressure, fine and applied arts, ancient studies, and religion were to be considered only after other needs had been filled, and applied social studies were to be given a lower priority. The effect, of course, is to virtually rule out these fields for NDEA support.

Congressional Scrutiny

On both sides of the Capitol, the Office of Education states its case for funds before the same appropriations subcommittees that have jurisdiction over the National Institutes of Health. In the case of NIH, the questioning is aimed at encouraging and almost badgering NIH officials into new lines of research: in the case of the Office of Education, however, these same members of Congress scrutinize each request for funds to make certain that their money is being spent precisely as Congress intended. Last February, for example, at the House appropiations hearings, Office of Education officials were grilled because they had added $12,000 from the agency's general budget to $70,000 that Congress had appropriated for a library exhibit at the Seattle World's Fair. In addition, they had taken $27,000 in NDEA library research funds and granted it to a university for research to be applied to the preparation of the exhibit. Chairman Fogarty of the subcommittee listened with displeasure to the accounting and warned agency officials that in the future they had better stop juggling their accounts and pay close attention to Congress. (By contrast, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration recently set up a $2-million fellowship program to finance the studies of a total of 100 students at ten universities. NASA has no specific authority in its legislation to undertake educational activities, but no one in Congress has questioned NASA's program.)

The inevitable effect of these ex-

changes with the purse-holding Congress is a pronounced timidity on the part of Office of Education officials when they contemplate new programs. Under McMurrin, the office was widely lauded for starting a curriculum research program into better methods of teaching English literature, composition, and grammar, along the line of the successful science curriculum research programs sponsored by the National Science Foundation. Critics of the office insist that it should branch out into other curriculum studies, but the wish is not the act, since Congress, again, takes a close interest in just what the office is studying. It is widely felt that curriculum research could profitably be applied to the field of social studies, but various elements in Congress, with divergent political, social, economic, and religious views, are acutely sensitive to the fact that they may not like what emerges from a federally financed venture into social studies. The Office of Education has no desire to be daring in this regard; it has therefore gone over the matter carefully with its congressional committees and if authority is granted, which seems likely, it will undertake curriculum research in a thoroughly uncontroversial area of social studies—geography.

The type of people being considered to replace McMurrin reflect the realization that it is going to take an unusual combination of qualities to make the Office of Education an important force in American education. Ideally, the new commissioner would have the executive dynamism of Defense Secretary McNamara, the educational prestige of James Conant, and the political acumen of Sargent Shriver, who has transformed a once-doubting Congress into an enthusiastic supporter of the Peace Corps. No man combines these qualities, of course, but if one did, it is unlikely that he would want to devote his time to rebuilding the Office of Education. The salary, $20,000, is something of an impediment, but first-class men have gone into government for less when they felt important results could be achieved. The search at present is concentrating on a number of educators who have sought or held elective office. On the basis of past experience it is not unlikely that the Administration will have to go far down its list of preferences to find a man who wants the job.—D. S. GREENBERG

Announcements

Forty secondary school students from the New York metropolitan area are taking a 6-week course at Columbia University in **computer mathematics and matrix algebra**. The course is given at the I.B.M. Watson Laboratory on the Columbia campus under the sponsorship of the Columbia Summer Session office and the university's School of Engineering and Applied Science. The students enrolled in the course were selected by competitive examination from among 1800 applicants.

The **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** plans to establish a New England Operations Office to coordinate activities between NASA and scientific and technical organizations in the area. The office, to be headed by Franklyn W. Phillips, assistant to the NASA administrator, will be located in the Boston area.

The Air Force Office of Scientific Research reports it provided $28.9 million in grants and contracts for support of **basic research projects** in the fiscal year that ended 30 June. The office said the funds were for the support of 642 projects in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and the Far East.

Grants, Fellowships, and Awards

Graduate training in **water resources** will be offered at the University of Texas in September under a Public Health Service grant. Stipends of $250 per month are available for students working toward the master of science in environmental health engineering degree: stipends of $300 per month are offered to candidates for the doctor of philosophy degree. (Director, Civil Engineering Department, University of Texas, Austin 12)

The American Association of University Women is offering the following fellowships in the **natural sciences** for 1963–64:

Marie Curie fellowship in radiology, physics, or chemistry ($5000); open to women who are French or American citizens.

Sarah Berliner fellowship in physics, chemistry, or biology ($5000), and the Ida H. Hyde fellowship in euthenics or eugenics ($5000); open to women of any country represented in the International Federation of University Women.

Applicants must hold a doctorate in the field of research required. Deadline: *1 December*. (Fellowships Office, AAUW Educational Foundation, 2401 Virginia Ave., NW, Washington 7)

Scientists in the News

Menard M. Gertler has been named director of the work evaluation unit scheduled to open in September at the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, New York University Medical Center. Gertler is associate attending physician in medicine at the University Hospital, and research director at the Institute. The new unit will be used for rehabilitation of cardiac patients.

Hans von Leden, associate professor of surgery at the University of California (Los Angeles) School of Medicine, has received the Casselberry award of the American Laryngological Association for his work in the mechanism of phonation.

The following have retired from the California Institute of Technology, receiving the title of emeritus professor:

Alfred H. Sturtevant, Thomas Hunt Morgan professor of genetics.

C. C. Lauritsen, professor of physics.

Earnest C. Watson, professor of physics and former dean of the faculty, on leave since 1960 as scientific attaché to the U.S. embassy in India.

Frederick J. Converse, professor of soil mechanics.

Gilbert Shapiro, formerly of Wayne State University, has become director of the Social Science Institute and associate professor of sociology-anthropology at Washington University. He succeeds Nicholas J. Demerath, who will devote full time to teaching and research after a year's leave of absence.

H. N. Laden, chief of new systems development at Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company, Cleveland, has been elected director of National Computer Analysts, Inc., in Princeton, N.J.